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## Old Testament Principles Relevant to Mutually Consensual Homoerotic Activity - Part 1

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# Old Testament principles relevant to mutually consensual homoerotic activity—Part 1 of 3

**T**his first section of a three-part study seeks to identify principles in the Old Testament relevant to the relationship between God's community of faith and individuals who engage in some forms of sexual activity outside heterosexual marriage. My primary focus will be on *mutually consensual homoerotic activity* as practiced by people within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) spectrum.<sup>1</sup>

## Impact of the Fall on the Creation ideal

Genesis 2 describes the Creation ideal for human sexual relationships: A male and female human being eternally joined as “one flesh” in a covenanted monogamous union, emulating the holy union of the Trinity. Through such marriage, two perfect humans made in God's image as complementary sexual opposites are to continue, through procreation, His Creation.<sup>2</sup>

The Old Testament shows how the Fall (Gen. 3) has affected the Creation ideal for marriage and sexuality in several ways. First, the male tends to be dominant (v. 16). Second, marriage is no longer eternal because husbands

and wives die (vv. 19, 22–24). Third, a man can become dissatisfied with his wife and divorce her (Deut. 24:1).<sup>3</sup> Fourth, sinful humans follow their desires to contract marriages that are not according to God's will (e.g., Gen. 4:19—bigamy; 6:1–3). Fifth, people follow their desires to engage in various kinds of sexual activity outside marriage.<sup>4</sup> Sixth, due to various factors, some people are infertile (Gen. 11:30; 25:21) or even unable to perform sexually (Isa. 56:3—eunuch).

God responded to the fallen human condition by permitting and even blessing remarriage after the death of one's spouse (Ruth 1:4, 5; 4:10–17), allowing but regulating divorce under certain conditions (Deut. 24:1–4), regulating and discouraging polygamy (Exod. 21:10, 11; Lev. 18:18; Deut. 21:15–17),<sup>5</sup> allowing marriage between close relatives (Gen. 4:26; cf. v. 17) but later prohibiting it as the human race degenerated (Lev. 18; 20), and prohibiting all forms of sexual activity outside of marriage (also Lev. 18; 20). Thus, He mercifully accommodated to human weakness in some ways, but He did not change the principle that sexual activity is restricted to marriage, defined as a

covenanted union between a man and a woman. This principle survived the Fall and consequent depreciation of the image of God in human beings.

The fact that God limits legitimate sexual activity to marriage rules out the possibility that His community of believers in full and regular standing can include those who violate His will by engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage as He defines it (Lev. 18; 20). Since the Fall, this permanent principle must be applied to a human condition that has become rather messy. For one thing, distinctions between the genders are not always as clear as they were before the Fall. The Bible defines sexual identity as either male or female solely in terms of reproductive organs, but some individuals can have characteristics of both genders.

## Growth in grace

Another complication comes because all types of people come to God through Christ to be saved (e.g., Matt. 9:10; John 12:32; cf. Luke 14:21–23) and their transformation involves a learning curve as they progressively understand and follow divine principles. Not all issues between them and God

instantly vaporize the moment they start coming to Him, but He nurtures their positive response. For example, God commanded the Israelites to love the resident foreigners among them and treat them well (Exod. 22:21 [in the Hebrew this is v. 20]; 23:9; Lev. 19:10, 33, 34). These foreigners were not full-fledged citizens like native Israelites, and they were not responsible for keeping all of the religious instructions that applied to the Israelites, such as requirements for observing annual festivals and giving tithes and first-fruit offerings (e.g., Exod. 23:16, 19; Lev. 23:4–44; 27:30, 32; Num. 18).

However, they were accountable for allegiance to the covenant Deity (Exod. 12:19; Lev. 16:29), compliance with His basic guidelines for moral (including sexual) behavior (Lev. 17:10, 12, 13; 18:26; 20:2; 24:16, 22), and purification from physical ritual impurity, in some cases (Lev. 17:15; Num. 19:10). They were permitted to engage in ritual worship with the Israelites, provided that they followed the applicable rules (Exod. 12:48, 49; Lev. 17:8; 22:18; Num. 9:14; 15:14–16), and they were required to gain expiation from violations of divine commandments through purification offerings (so-called “sin offerings”; Num. 15:26, 29). In these ways, God sought to draw foreigners who had little or no knowledge of Him into closer relationships with His faith community in order to partly fulfill His purpose of making the descendants of Abraham a channel of blessing to all people (Gen. 12:3; 22:18).

Basically, the same divine approach applies today to spiritual “Israel” (Gal. 3:26–29), with the qualifications that we are a church of believers, rather than a theocratic nation belonging to a certain ethnic group, and are also informed by the life and ministry of Christ (2 Cor. 3). In harmony with His example (Matt. 9:10, 11; Luke 15:1, 2), we should allow faulty people (like ourselves!) to come to God and gain strength in their relationship to Him by granting them access to fellowship and worship with us, without compromising the

principles for which we are accountable to Him, so that influence flows in a positive direction only. When the Pharisees questioned Jesus’ inclusive outreach, He replied, “‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners’ ” (Matt. 9:12, 13, ESV).

## Our response

God does not hold people accountable for light that they have not received or do not understand (James 4:17). So we would be committing a serious

crime if we were to bar our hearts and church doors against individuals with issues, including sexual issues, who are foreigners to God’s ways and morally immature but whom He is drawing to Himself (cf. Matt. 19:14). Whether or not they will be able to officially join and remain in the faith community depends on their acceptance of “nonnegotiables” to which God holds the community accountable. According to Jesus, the greatest nonnegotiable expressed in the Old Testament is the eternal, outgoing, and redemptive principle of unselfish love (Matt. 22:37–40; Luke 10:27–37; cf. Lev. 19:18, 34; Deut. 6:5).

(Part 2 will appear in the November 2015 issue.) ❖

1 An earlier form of this study was presented on March 18, 2014, at the “‘In God’s Image’: Scripture, Sexuality, and Society” summit organized by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, held in Cape Town, South Africa. For much more discussion of this issue, see Roy E. Gane, Nicholas P. Miller, and H. Peter Swanson, eds., *Homosexuality,*

*Marriage, and the Church: Biblical, Counseling, and Religious Liberty Issues* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2012), which includes Richard M. Davidson, “Homosexuality in the Old Testament,” 5–52; Robert A. J. Gagnon, “The Scriptural Case for a Male-Female Prerequisite for Sexual Relations: A Critique of the Arguments of Two Adventist Scholars,” 53–161; and Roy E. Gane, “Some Attempted Alternatives to Timeless Biblical Condemnation of Homosexual Acts,” 163–74.

2 James V. Brownson argues that “the language of ‘one flesh’ in Genesis 2:24 does not refer to physical gender complementarity, but to the common bond of shared kinship. Therefore, to say that the same-sex erotic acts depicted in Romans 1:26–27 are ‘against nature’ because they violate the physical complementarity of the genders depicted in the one-flesh union of Genesis 2:24 is simply mistaken” (*Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* [Grand Rapids,

MI: Eerdmans, 2013], 35). It is true that Genesis 2:24 emphasizes unity, but other parts of the Creation account reveal complementarity. For example, in 1:27, 28, God created male and female and blessed their procreation. In 2:18, God says of Adam, “‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him’ ” (ESV). The words “fit for him” translate Hebrew *K’negdo* (cf. v. 20), in which *neged* refers to “that which is opposite, that which corresponds” (Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, transl. and ed. M. E. J. Richardson [Leiden: Brill, 2001], 1:666). This indicates difference as well as similarity (cf. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 30, esp. n. 27).

3 In the New Testament, Jesus also referred to the possibility that a wife could divorce her husband (Mark 10:12).

4 These include premarital sex (Exod. 22:16 [in the Hebrew this is v. 15]), rape (Gen. 34:2), adultery, incest, homosexual activity, and bestiality (Lev. 18; 20). The Old Testament does not mention masturbation. Onan’s sin was *coitus interruptus* to short-circuit the purpose of levirate marriage (Gen. 38:9).

5 On Leviticus 18:18, which some interpreters take to be a comprehensive prohibition of all polygamy, see Roy E. Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers, NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 319, 320.

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